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THE OPERA.

BY EDMUND C. STANTON.

NO ONE will deny that America has made, during the last decade, vast and important strides in matters musical and operatic. With the story of the latter's progress I had, fortunately for myself, a close connection during the period of seven seasons when grand opera in German held sway at the Metropolitan Opera-House; and I do not think it will be considered out of place on my part to say that opera reached with us a development, after the several seasons, that demands the completion—that is to say, the carrying-out to the fullest the artistic completeness—of these great principles in operatic arts of which Richard Wagner must always be acknowledged the great representative. In saying this I do not wish to be considered in any way a Wagnerite, pure and simple; but we must all admit that to ignore Richard Wagner and his magnificent work in raising up opera to the highest artistic possibilities, while compassing what he has styled the Music-Drama,—that is, the cohesion of all the arts in the splendor of music,—would be to place ourselves, at the very least, a decade back in our artistic and musical tastes and operatic enjoyments.

Italian opera is again with us at the Metropolitan, and it will be interesting to note how far the charms of the operatic entertainments, that have given so much pleasure to generations ever since opera became a fashionable feature of social life, still hold in a generation of opera-goers that has had the advantage of hearing the works of the greatest composers of nationalities abroad.

In the concert hall it is certain that a list of the numbers copied from a fashionable programme of twenty years ago would not be tolerated by modern concert-goers. The same may be said in regard to opera, and any attempt to revive anything more than a passing enthusiasm for the works embraced in what may be styled the old repertory, without paying attention to the modern productions in the realm of opera, must inevitably result in artis-

tic disappointment, even if interpreted by the greatest of singers. I do not say that the old favorite operas should be excluded from the modern repertory. They demand a place in it for the sake of those of the younger generation who have not heard them. But the works of modern composers can be relied on to satisfy the demand for all the melodious charms on which the fame of the old repertory so long rested, because of the added grandeur of modern orchestration and dramatic and poetic completeness. The orchestra of to-day is vastly different from and a grander organism than that for which the old Italian masters wrote their works. Brought to its present standard by the artistic demands of the symphony, it has taken its natural place as a majestic, collective, interpretative organism in the Music-Drama, and in modern opera in general, from which it can never more be removed.

But opera in Italian will always be listened to with pleasure for one reason : Italy still retains her preëminence in the art of song, even though her singers are only for the smaller part of Italian nationality. During the reign of the Wagnerian opera the gentler beauties of the human voice were undoubtedly oftentimes sacrificed to an unnecessary extent ; though this was due to faulty vocal methods prevalent among some German singers and to a misunderstanding of the lyrical-dramatic nature of the Music-Drama. Solo singing was too often made to take a secondary part in Wagnerian interpretations, and the Wagnerian conductors too frequently allowed the orchestra to run riot in the attempt to reach the utmost possibilities in dramatic climaxes. But at the Metropolitan, season after season, the methods of interpreting Wagner underwent a beneficent change, and the advent of the pure lyric tenor and the smooth, suave, baritone, in place of the so-called heroic singers of a decade ago, brought out beauties in the Wagner scores that had remained obscure to German audiences.

The objection to the declamatory and heroic styles, falsely imagined by many singers and critics to be the expression of dramatic feeling and intensity, was not only artistically justified, but was a sign of the unerring and delicate appreciation of true artistic work on the part of our highly-strung, nervous American audiences. Art to the American, especially to the American woman,—who must always remain the final court of appeal in matters musical and operatic,—is not noise or coarseness, but beauty

and chasteness and naturalness ; in other words, Art in its absolute simplicity beautifies and idealizes all that it touches. It would be quite impossible for us to understand the enthusiasm that greeted the lyrically charming and artistically simple and natural beauties of "Siegfried" or the deep, tender, emotional truth of "Fidelio," if we did not admit the intuitive power of artistic appreciation which, if not born with, is at least second nature with, cultured American women.

This intuitive artistic feeling of Truth in Art is a glorious boon that has been developed in our country and nurtured by many positive, if indistinct, influences. Sprung from diverse stock, the American woman has won recognition not only for personal beauty, but for high literary, artistic, and musical taste and intelligence, throughout the civilized world. In Music she has had the advantage of training under the most capable masters, sent to us in periods of revolution and overcrowding by the most cultured of European nations. The pupils of our schools and seminaries have had the benefit of the ripest scholarship and the highest artistic training imparted to them by the best of European teachers. They have enjoyed the incalculable advantage of being initiated at once into the highest results of musical production and training of the age in which they live, without having had to undergo the ordeal of unlearning and shaking off the vitiated inheritance of decades of commonplace in music and opera through which Europe had to pass.

Then, to assist this natural, inherited appreciation of the highest art presented to them, came the benefits of travel and leisure, and years of study and education in the great European capitals, enjoyed by those whom wealth has fortunately made the great supporters of our opera. Audiences at the Metropolitan are essentially cosmopolitan. They have heard all that is best in the great opera-houses of the world, and if they cannot go into raptures over the memories of the singing of the great artists of the past, they have heard, and enjoyed, and become permeated with, all that is artistic and beautiful which Europe has had to offer of late years, and they could no more sink back into the enthusiasms that satisfied the audiences of a quarter of a century ago than could our modern theatre-goers applaud the mouthings and struttings of the dead histrionic heroes of melodramatic fame. They have spent seasons in Munich, where the Wagnerian

operas used to be given in such beautiful and artistic completeness. They have made their pilgrimages to Bayreuth and seen the great music-dramas produced under the eye of the master. They have seen all the glories of spectacular in Meyerbeer, as given at the Grand Opera in Paris, and the ballets of Milan and Vienna given in all their glitter and magnificence.

Long before the Wagner seasons at the Metropolitan, the great American audience was ready to receive, and to appreciate to the fullest extent, the marvellous creations of the prophet of Bayreuth and his new revelations in operatic art,—the Art Work that embraces Drama and Song, Painting and Poetry, Architecture and Music, welded into a wonderful artistic whole,—and I believe it to be the universal testimony of those who have followed the history of Wagnerism here and abroad that nowhere has the reception of the Music-Drama been so spontaneous and heartily enthusiastic as here. Nowhere has Wagner been more deeply and truly understood in the poetic, dramatic, and musical compass of his splendid genius. All this, thanks to the beneficent influence of the American woman upon matters artistic and musical in America.

This brings me to the discussion of a fundamental principle of true operatic exposition—the necessity of good all-around casts and the exclusion of the system of stars. It must not be imagined for a moment, however, that good all-around excellence in casts should exclude the highest art in singing. During the seven seasons of grand opera in German at the Metropolitan, singers were heard who surely will stand comparison with the stars of the great Italian seasons. In devotion to true artistic principles, in the fervor of dramatic exposition, they were, for the most part, superior to their Italian confrères,—at least to those of the old school,—though no one would venture to deny that the beauty of art in song is still royally held by the Italians. But singing is only one important accompaniment in the operatic performance of to-day and of the future. To produce an opera in the style that shall meet the requirements of a modern American audience, which has seen the best that Europe has to present, which knows its Wagner and Beethoven by heart, whose musical taste and education have evoked the praise of a Von Bulow and a Tschaikowsky, demands a vastly greater artistic capacity than in the olden days.

The production of the art-effects that Wagner demanded, this blending as far as possible of Music, Singing, Painting, and Drama, requires not only the assistance of a small army of skilful and artistic people, drilled under the most competent direction, but infinite patience in unceasing work, beginning with the separate rehearsals of chorus, orchestra, and soloists, and ending only after weeks of hard and earnest labor, when all the forces are brought together for the final rehearsals upon the stage. Then the work of the stage-manager has to be attended to, and scenic effects given in such a way that they shall agree with the intentions of the composer, so that the artistic results in the presentation of the scenes shall enhance the artistic enjoyment of the entire performance. It is not always the most expensive *mise-en-scène* that produces the greatest artistic results. The cost of the second act of "Tristan and Isolde" was astonishingly small, yet infinite trouble and patience and great artistic knowledge in the manipulation of lights were necessary before the work could be properly presented to the public.

What infinite patience is needed before the elaborately built-up scenes of "Rheingold"—one representing the bed of the Rhine with its flowing waters, with its elaborate machinery for the swimming Rhine maidens; another with its towering walls of Walhalla, its scenes of storm and lightning after the gathering of the clouds at the command of Loki; another with its rainbow bridge over which the Teutonic gods pass on their way to their heavenly home—can be revealed to the public in artistic beauty and completeness! What a vast amount of patient working is demanded, again, for the production of scenic illusions, even for the simplicity of the second act of "Siegfried," when the hero is discovered resting under the forest tree, and where the dancing effect of sunlight upon the sword has to be imitated from nature in order to harmonize with the exquisite Waldweben music of the orchestra, where scenery and music must combine to produce that delightful dream of idealic charm and loveliness! Only with the assistance of artistically competent heads of departments, the devotion of principals, and the willing obedience of supernumeraries, could the great Wagnerian art-works have been produced at the Metropolitan, even with the aid of the large sums of money furnished by the box-holders and subscribers. Only an organization having some degree of stability and permanence can pos-

sibly hope to present modern opera in a way that can satisfy the demands of American audiences in the future.

And the work before the operatic intendant of the future will be, I think, even greater than that which was accomplished during the seven years of grand opera in German, when nearly all the great works of the greatest composer of modern times were so successfully and brilliantly produced. The work done during those seven seasons would have tasked to their utmost the efforts of even the most experienced of European operatic organizations. Through the German and their own language American audiences were enabled to enjoy for the first time, presented and sung in a way that compared more than favorably with the productions in the great German capitals, the four operas composing "The Ring of the Nibelung," namely, "Rheingold," "Walküre," "Siegfried," and "Götterdämmerung," besides "Die Meistersinger," "Rienzi," and "Tristan and Isolde," in which appeared artists like Materna, Lehmann, Brandt, Schroeder-Hanfstaengel, Ritter-Goetze, Mielke, Niemann, Vogl, Reichmann, Gudehus, Robinson, Emil Fischer, Alvary, and a host of others who had won fame as Wagner singers in Germany or in Bayreuth.

Besides the Wagner works, there were produced during those seven seasons, for the first time on this side of the Atlantic, Victor Nessler's "Trumpeter of Säckingen," Spontini's "Ferdinand Cortez," Weber's "Euryanthe," Cornelius's "Barber of Bagdad," Franchetti's "Asrael," Smareglia's "Vassal of Szigeth," Goldmark's "Queen of Sheba" and "Merlin"; then came the magnificent revivals of Beethoven's "Fidelio," Meyerbeer's "Prophet" and "L'Africaine," Weber's "Freischütz," Rossini's "William Tell," Auber's "Stumme von Portici," and Halévy's "Jewess," besides several ballet operas, a style of entertainment which had never before been introduced here on the grand operatic stage. It is true that there gradually arose a demand for change; and the filling of this demand by the present season of Italian opera is the legitimate outcome of an artistic catholicity of taste which I should be the last to condemn.

It is this catholicity of taste in matters musical and operatic, in fact, that will demand in the future a repertory that shall embrace the operatic productions of all the musical countries of the world. To meet the demand of the catholic, cosmopolitan, and international spirit of our musical taste, the operatic purveyors

of the future will have to search through the world for what is highest and best. Italy must yet be considered non-productive, so far as operas of the newer school are concerned. Even Verdi, who attempted, but failed, to assimilate and Italianize the Wagnerian idea, can no longer draw audiences as of yore. Boito, one of the moderns, has failed to fulfil the promises of his early genius, and only Mascagni in his "*Cavalleria Rusticana*" and "*L' Amico Fritz*" seems to promise the beginning of a new and glorious era for Italian opera once more. His smaller work has been accepted with enthusiasm, and the welcome given to it is assuredly justly deserved, for he has been able to carry out to completion the Wagnerian ideas, the wedding of poetry, drama, and music, in his own way. His genius is apparently born of true, simple, natural inspiration, derived from the subject treated ; his every musical phrase throbs with the poetic and dramatic significance of the emotional situation ; he is a modern Italian composer to whom the world bows in willing homage.

But the impresario of the future will not confine himself to Italy or to Germany. The Slavic countries and Hungary have already produced operas of sterling merit and startling originality. And what a splendid operatic mine has yet to be exploited for our benefit in Russia, which can boast of not only a national but of an international operatic repertory, including works by composers of all countries, not excepting Wagner, and which has symphonic and operatic composers like Rubinstein and Tschaikowsky. Turning to Bohemia, there is Dvorák, whose cantatas alone are known to us, but who has written several interesting operas for the Bohemian stage ; while England has produced of late years several grand operas by her native composers, some of which have been adopted in the German operatic repertory. France, too, has many modern writers of opera, whose works have not yet been heard here, but which have found brilliant interpretation, for the most part in Brussels.

Why, then, should the operatic repertory of New York be confined to the works of Italian and French composers of a quarter of a century or more ago, worn out, and only revived to enthusiasm with the assistance of exceptional singers, demanding exceptional prices and necessitating the curtailment of expenses in every other direction, thus prohibiting the production of opera as an Art-Work ? The operatic repertory of the future must of

necessity be cosmopolitan and international in character. During the last season of grand opera in German the directors of the Metropolitan made a beginning in this direction, and only the constant and pressing demand on the part of the public for the Wagnerian repertory compelled a postponement in carrying out the plans to completion.

Such a repertory will embrace all nationalities and all schools, more especially the modern. We are essentially a cosmopolitan people, and should not, if we wish to develop further in musical and operatic taste, confine ourselves slavishly to the production of the operas of any one school or country. In what language this international repertory is to be sung is yet a matter of earnest thought and discussion. It seems probable that we must eventually adopt the English, but, for the present, we can hardly afford to prohibit by our language the engagement of the many great singers of the world who cannot do, and never will be able to do, themselves or their art justice in our vernacular. This difficulty will presumably settle itself in good time. Fortunately, we can feel assured of this: that whenever opera is presented in New York in its artistic completeness, the audiences will not fail to give it the necessary support, not because the opera-house is a centre of fashionable resort, but because they are themselves imbued with the true artistic spirit of appreciation of what is high and true in musical and operatic art.

EDMUND C. STANTON.